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ELLERY QUEEN'S

Mystery Magazine®

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a **NEW** detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

We can't help repeating: if no author's name appeared under the title of this story, or if the story was signed with a pseudonym, you would still know the true identity of the author. Jack Ritchie's stories are sui generis—they have a style and content all their own. And a humor that is solely Ritchiean. The authorship is unmistakable.

Join our old friends again, detectives Henry and Ralph, and listen to the theories and deductions flying fast and furious. You've got to be on your 'tec toes to keep up with Henry Turnbuckle . . .

THE 23 BROWN PAPER BAGS

by **JACK RITCHIE**

On the rear floor of the victim's automobile we found 23 small brown paper bags, each containing two bars of hand soap. Sales slips indicated that they had been purchased at 23 different supermarkets.

"Well, Ralph," I said happily. "What do you make of this?"

"Nothing yet, Henry."

According to the victim's wallet, he had been James L. Flanagan, age 58, and a resident of Big Cedar Falls, a small community some 70 miles north of our city.

Flanagan had been shot once through the heart while sitting in his automobile before unit Number 33 of the Sunset Motel. His body had been discovered at approximately 9:15 that evening by a couple who had just been assigned Number 34. No one appeared to have seen the murder or heard the shot.

When Ralph and I arrived at the scene, several squad cars had preceded us and cordoned off the area from the gathering crowd.

Scattered about inside the car beside Flanagan, we recovered over \$400 in bills, all of them ones, fives, and tens. The victim's topcoat pockets yielded nearly \$10 in silver.

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"Looks like a holdup that went sour," Ralph said. "Flanagan took the wallet out of his pocket and then he either decided to resist or the holdup man thought he was about to, and pulled the trigger. The impact of the bullet caused Flanagan to scatter the bills and the gunman decided that he wasn't going to stay at the scene of a murder grubbing around a corpse for bills."

"And how do you explain the twenty-three bags of soap?"

"I don't. What makes you think that they have anything at all to do with the killing?"

"Ralph," I said somberly. "They are the very heart of the matter."

We had removed Flanagan's tagged motel key from his pocket and now I unlocked the door of unit Number 33 and we entered. It was a typical motel room, containing the basic twin beds, TV set, several chairs, and two night tables.

I began searching. In a bureau drawer I found a small supply of underwear, shirts, socks, and handkerchiefs. "Ah, ha," I said.

"Ah, ha what?"

"Flanagan brought shirts and a few other things with him, but I doubt if he transported them in a paper bag. So where is his suitcase? There was none in his car and there is none in this room. It all fits in."

"What fits in?"

"The man who shot Flanagan also stole his suitcase. After he shot Flanagan he cold-bloodedly reached into the car and took Flanagan's suitcase."

"Why would he want to steal Flanagan's suitcase?"

"Because it still contained some very valuable merchandise. And Flanagan kept the suitcase with him at all times, I'll wager. Wherever he went. Ralph, now think intensely: why would a man buy forty-six bars of the same brand of soap at twenty-three different places?"

Ralph shrugged. "Maybe he was trying to get change."

"Exactly."

He looked at me.

"Ralph, Flanagan wanted legitimate money for the counterfeit twenty-dollar bills he was passing. In other words, he would buy two bars of soap, get approximately nineteen and a half dollars in change, and then move on to the next supermarket and repeat the process."

Ralph looked skyward. "Henry, what makes you so positive

these alleged counterfeit bills had to be twenties? Why not fives, or tens, or hundreds?"

"Because, inflation being what it is, it simply does not make sense to counterfeit five- or ten-dollar bills any more. If you are going to counterfeit money, you might just as well make twenty-dollar bills. After all, it requires no more skill or time to counterfeit a twenty than it does a five or a ten."

Ralph was difficult to sell. "Why couldn't he have been passing phony one-hundred-dollar bills?"

"Because you just don't go into a supermarket and present a hundred-dollar bill in payment for two bars of soap. You would be remembered and perhaps unkindly. But who remembers your face or your twenty-dollar bill in the express line of a supermarket? Perhaps half of the bills cashed there are twenties."

Ralph sighed. "Maybe."

"Ralph," I said, "we are undoubtedly dealing with a syndicate murder."

"What syndicate?"

"Any syndicate. There's bound to be one behind this."

"And how do you arrive at that, Henry?"

"Because counterfeiting is not exactly a Mom and Pop operation. One needs the engraver, the plates, the paper, and the distribution system." I nodded wisely. "Yes, I suspect that Flanagan tried to double-cross the syndicate in some way. So the syndicate put out a contract on him and hired a hit man."

"Contract? Hit man?"

"Ralph, that is underworld jargon for—"

"I know. I know."

When we stepped out of the motel unit, one of the fingerprint men approached us. "We got a thumbprint from the window frame of Flanagan's car and it doesn't belong to Flanagan."

Ralph looked at me. "Have you ever heard of a hit man who would leave his thumbprint on the car of his victim?"

"Ralph," I said patiently, "why does the print have to be that of our hit man? I'll wager it probably belongs to the attendant at the last service station Flanagan patronized."

We began walking toward the manager's office.

"Ralph, I think I can intelligently reconstruct the entire case. Flanagan worked for the syndicate as a passer of counterfeit money. He periodically traveled from city to city passing the twenty-dollar bills, keeping a portion of the proceeds for himself

and passing on to the syndicate that which belonged to the syndicate. However, he got greedy."

"How do you know he got greedy?"

"Ralph, it is common knowledge that whenever anybody crosses the syndicate it is usually because of greed. He tried to hold out on the take. And so when Flanagan parked his car here after a successful day of passing phony twenties, the hit man was waiting. He ordered Flanagan to remove any of the twenties he might still have in his wallet and hand them over."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because the last thing the syndicate would want is for the police to find phony twenties on Flanagan and begin putting two and two together. And after disposing of Flanagan, the killer calmly reached into the car and took Flanagan's suitcase. Undoubtedly it still contained stacks of twenties which Flanagan had not yet had the opportunity to cash."

"Henry, did you notice the wound? Very little blood and the bullet didn't even come out of his back. I'll bet the coroner finds a .22 slug. Did you ever hear of a hit man who used a .22?"

It took a couple of steps to come up with the only logical explanation. "Just as an expert fisherman takes pride in the lightness, or test, of his line, so does our hit man take pride in the smallness of the caliber of the weapon he uses. I wouldn't be at all surprised if one of these days we find a .190 slug in the carcass of a syndicate victim."

We entered the motel manager's office.

He was a bald bulky man who had obviously fortified himself with a few drinks while he waited to be questioned.

"What can you tell us about James L. Flanagan?" I asked.

He blinked. "Who's Flanagan?"

I smiled. "Ah, but of course. Flanagan used an alias when he registered. I am speaking of the deceased."

"He registered as Albert Johnson this morning at about ten o'clock and I gave him the key."

I nodded. "Did he stop here regularly? Say for a few days every month or two?"

The manager shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I've been here only two weeks."

I frowned thoughtfully.

He elaborated. "But I been working for the syndicate for nearly twenty-years."

Ralph seemed to wake up. "Syndicate?"

The manager nodded. "Allied Properties. It owns hundreds of these motels all over the country. I used to manage a place in St. Paul, but the climate finally got to me and I was given a transfer."

I took Ralph aside and lowered my voice. "Did you hear what he said, Ralph? He works for the syndicate."

"Henry, it's a different kind of syndicate."

I chuckled. "It all reminds me of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*."

"Everything reminds you of *The Purloined Letter*."

I nodded. "Ralph, where is the best place to hide a syndicate? In a syndicate, of course. We have just been talking to our hit man. He was cleverly placed here by the syndicate for the sole purpose of eliminating Flanagan. What would you like to bet that within a week or two he will be transferred again. Don't you see, Ralph, our hit man is coolly twitting the police by announcing that he is a member of the syndicate, thinking that we will assume that he means Allied Properties."

I moved back to the manager and shrewdly asked, "Is there anything at all you can tell us about the man who registered as Albert Johnson?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Except that there was a woman asking for him this afternoon."

I frowned. "A woman?"

"She came in about four thirty and asked for Johnson's unit number. I told her."

"And then what did she do?"

"She looked down at Number 33 and I guess she figured he wasn't in because his car wasn't there. So she got on her bicycle and rode away."

"Bicycle?" Ralph said.

I closed in. "Can you describe this woman?"

"She was about the middle twenties, I'd guess. Black hair. Blue eyes. Average height. Wearing glasses. Good-looking in a quiet way."

"Did she leave a name?" I asked.

"No. She just asked for Johnson's number."

I drew Ralph aside once more. "I have been wrong."

"Impossible."

I nodded. "I must admit it. However, I was dealing with a puzzle in which one piece did not fit."

"What piece is that, Henry?"

"The .22 caliber slug."

"But you said—"

I held up a hand. "I was wrong, Ralph, and I am man enough to admit it. Don't you see, Ralph, we are not dealing with a hit *man*, but a hit *woman*. Or hit person, if you prefer. The .22 caliber is a woman's weapon. Our hit person waited in the darkness for Flanagan to return from his day's work. She shot him, stole the suitcase, hopped onto her bike, and expertly pedaled away."

Ralph went back to the manager. "Do you have any aspirins?"

When Ralph and I got back to headquarters, we put in a phone call to the Chief of Police of Big Cedar Falls. We found that not only was Flanagan a highly respected member of that community, but he was also its mayor and the Scout Leader of Troop 147. In dying, he had left behind a wife, though no children.

The next afternoon, when Ralph and I reported in for our swing shift, Captain Masterson had more information for us.

"Every two months or so we get a big batch of phony twenties passed here. They all come from the same plate and the plate was made by Jerry Stockton, one of the best engravers this country ever had."

I nodded. "And nobody knows where Stockton is?"

"We know where he is all right. In his grave. He died in a federal pen about fifteen years ago." Masterson leaned back in his swivel chair. "Stockton served one term for making ten-dollar bills when a ten-dollar bill still meant something. When he came out, he got a good job with a legitimate engraving firm. But after a year he suddenly disappeared. He was still on parole at the time, so naturally the government was interested and also suspicious. Either he had, or was about to, make another set of plates.

"And sure enough, phony twenties started showing up in and around Portland, Oregon. The experts recognized Stockton's work—they tell me that each engraver's got his own particular style—and so the T-men closed in on the area and after a couple of months picked him up. He was holed up on a farm just outside of Portland. They also found the plates and about three million dollars in counterfeit twenties."

"Ah," I said. "But obviously there were more printed counterfeits than everybody thought?"

"Obviously. Five years after Stockton's arrest they suddenly began appearing in the mideast. And they've been doing that reg-

ularly for the last twenty-five years."

Ralph had a question. "How come Stockton could be picked up in a couple of months, but nobody's been able to lay hands on the passer here in twenty-five years?"

"Because in Oregon the T-men knew who they were looking for. They went up there with a lot of Stockton's mug shots and spread them around. It was just a matter of time before Stockton was spotted and they could close in. But here it's different. We don't know who the passer or passers are or what they look like."

"Captain," I said, "I would like the department's permission to go to Big Cedar Falls and speak to James L. Flanagan's widow."

"Henry," Masterson said, "you've got a nice interesting theory and all, but actually we've got nothing concrete to tie Flanagan in with the phony twenties. Not even one sample." Then he sighed. "You won't have to go all the way up to Big Cedar Falls. His widow came down today and she's waiting for the coroner to release her husband's body so that she can make arrangements to have it shipped back home for burial." He handed me a slip of paper. "This is where she's staying while she's here. But be careful, Henry. Flanagan was the mayor of Big Cedar Falls and a Boy Scout Leader. Personally, I don't think he had a damn thing to do with passing counterfeit money."

Ralph and I drove to 414 East Cumberland. The address proved to be a three-story apartment building perhaps half a mile from the motel in which Flanagan had been killed.

In the foyer of the building I examined the mailbox slots. Number 306 was identified by a single word: Flanagan.

I rubbed my chin.

"There's one thing that bothers me, Henry," Ralph said. "If Flanagan was passing counterfeit twenties, why did he buy just soap? Why not cigarettes at one place, ballpoint pens at another, and so on?"

"Probably as a novice passer twenty-five years ago he did that very thing, Ralph. However, he soon discovered that making twenty-five or more decisions a day for several days could become quite wearing. Therefore he decided to concentrate on a single commodity on each excursion. Yesterday it was soap. Today, if he had lived, it might have been canned tuna."

On the third floor I knocked at door Number 306.

It was opened by a composed, mild-eyed woman in her late forties.

"Mrs. Flanagan?" I asked.

"Yes."

Ralph and I identified ourselves. "We're sorry to intrude on you at a moment like this," I said. "However, we would like to ask you a few questions about your husband."

She allowed us to enter the apartment. It was a rather small place with overflowing bookcases.

"Mrs. Flanagan," I said. "You and your husband are natives of Big Cedar Falls?"

"Well, yes and no. I was born there, but Jimmy wasn't. He came from Oregon. But I guess he didn't like Oregon much, because he hardly ever mentioned it at all."

"Your husband was the mayor of Big Cedar Falls?"

She nodded.

"How much does the job pay?"

"Seven hundred dollars a year. It's a very part-time job, except on the Fourth of July, when he has to make a speech and supervise the fireworks."

I cleared my throat. "Then obviously being the mayor of Big Cedar Falls was not your husband's manner of earning a living?"

"He was a traveling salesman. Industrial insurance. And he must have been a really good one because actually he didn't have to travel too much to earn a nice living. He was gone only a few days each month."

"Did you ever see any of the brochures, pamphlets, or other literature that a seller of industrial insurance might carry with him?"

"Well, no. The truth is that I'm not really interested in the world of business. I know I should feel guilty about it, but I'm just a housewife and gardener and belong to all our civic clubs. This year we came out strong against vandalism in the town park."

There was a brief knock at the door.

"That's probably Deidre," Mrs. Flanagan said. "This is her apartment."

She opened the door and I found myself staring at a girl carrying a bag of groceries. She was in her mid-twenties. Black hair. Blue eyes. Average height. Wearing glasses. And good-looking in a quiet way.

Hmm, I thought.

Mrs. Flanagan introduced us. "Deidre is my niece. My brother's daughter. When she was ten years old, my brother and his wife

were killed in an automobile accident and Deidre came to stay with us. Deidre's a Teacher's Assistant at the university here and she's working on her Ph.D. Her thesis is on crossword puzzles, double-crostics, and other words games, and their effect on the ego."

Deidre regarded me warily.

I smiled. "Public storehouse?"

"Etape," she said.

"Click beetle?"

"Elator. Usually. Sometimes Dor. Or Dorr." She spelled the last two nouns.

"Tilled land?"

"Arada. Less frequently arado."

I nodded approvingly. "Basic, of course. But do you know a five-letter word for the shin bone of the New Guinea aborigine?"

A phone rang in the kitchenette and Deidre went to answer it. She looked back into the room. "It's a Captain Masterson. He'd like to speak to either one of you."

Ralph went to the phone.

Mrs. Flanagan had been studying me. "So you're a policeman? Actually Jimmy used to be a policeman himself. A state trooper in Oregon. He never mentioned anything about it at all though except for one evening a few years ago when he came home from the Kiwanis picnic with a few too many beers and got talkative. But he never talked about it again."

I turned to Deidre. "Do you have a bicycle?"

"Yes. A ten-speed."

"When your uncle came to town, he always stayed at the Sunset Motel?"

"Yes. My apartment is too cramped and so he always preferred to spend the night there."

Mrs. Flanagan nodded. "I'm going to stay at a hotel tonight. Deidre has just one bedroom and she's offered to sleep on the davenport, but I wouldn't hear of it."

I spoke to Deidre. "Were you at the Sunset Motel at approximately four thirty yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes. I happened to be passing by and I thought I'd drop in if he was there. But I could see that his car was gone, so I left."

"Did you go back to the motel later that evening?"

Her eyes flickered suspiciously. "No."

Ralph came back into the room. "Well, they got him."

I frowned. "Got who?"

Ralph spoke to Mrs. Flanagan. "The kid who shot your husband. A sixteen-year-old who lives in the neighborhood. He got hold of a .22 pistol and decided to try a stickup at the motel. He thought your husband was about to jump him, so he fired. Then he panicked and ran away."

"Ralph," I said, "there must be some mistake."

"No mistake. His thumbprint matches the one on the window frame of Flanagan's car. That's how the kid was tracked down. He's got a juvenile record and his prints are on file. They're doing the ballistics tests on his gun now. Also he confessed."

"Did they find the suitcase?" I asked.

"No, Henry. They didn't find any suitcase."

I turned to Mrs. Flanagan. "When your husband left home, he carried a suitcase, didn't he?"

She thought about that. "I don't really remember. Jimmy wasn't much of a packer. I've known him to just throw some clean underwear into a paper bag and that was that."

When Ralph and I reached our department car downstairs I said, "Ralph, I left my notebook back up there. I'll be back in a few minutes."

When I knocked at door 306 again, Deidre answered. "Oh?"

I beckoned her out into the hallway, closed the apartment door, then led her to the end of the hall.

"Let me tell you a story," I said. "Once upon a time there was a young state trooper in Oregon, stationed somewhere near Portland. One fine day he participated in a raid on a farm on which a Jerry Stockton, forger *extraordinaire*, was apprehended, along with some three million dollars in counterfeit money and the plates which printed them. At the time the authorities thought that all the money printed had been confiscated. They were wrong.

"Somehow this trooper had stumbled on a cache of more counterfeit bills. But he did not turn them in. Instead he hid them. Then he waited five more years before he quit his job. He traveled halfway across the country and established a new identity. He settled down in a small town named Big Cedar Falls. He married. He had no children, but at least one niece. He became mayor of the town. But every month he would be away for a few days. To this city. Perhaps to others as well. And he passed the phony twenty-dollar bills."

She smiled admiringly. "You have a fantastic imagination."

I agreed. "And he did this all unbeknownst to his wife."

"Unbeknownst?"

"Yes. Because if it were beknownst, I don't think she would have so lightly and freely volunteered all that information about her husband." I regarded Deidre sternly. "But his nefarious activities were not unbeknownst to his niece."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I suspect that his niece has a great deal more curiosity than her aunt. And I imagine that she early began wondering whether her uncle really was a salesman of industrial insurance. Why was he home so much? She probably pried and spied, and it all combined to the point where he finally told her."

"Why do you think he told her?"

"Because yesterday afternoon at four thirty she stopped at the Sunset Motel and asked which unit her uncle was occupying."

Her eyes clouded in recall. "I don't see what that proves."

I smiled. "When she asked for her uncle's unit number, she did not ask for *James Flanagan's* number, she asked for *Albert Johnson's*."

"Oh," she said.

I nodded. "In other words, she knew that her uncle was registered there under an assumed name. And knowing that, is it too far-fetched to assume that she also knew *why* he was using an assumed name?"

I chided. "Why didn't she turn her uncle in to the authorities when she first learned that he was passing counterfeit money?"

"Oh, come now. If you had an uncle who took you in when your parents died and fed you and clothed you and saw to it that you received a good education, would you turn him in? It isn't like murder, you know."

Then she smiled. "She admits nothing. I understand that some four hundred dollars in bills were found with this uncle. I'll bet there wasn't a counterfeit twenty among them."

"True. But I now realize that this uncle had just *completed* cashing his quota of phony twenties for the day and so, of course, it would not be likely that he had any more of them in his wallet. However, he must have had more somewhere near him. I doubt that he came all the way down here to spend only one day cashing twenties. And it is those other twenties which have disappeared."

"You don't say?"

I did. "I believe that this niece came back to the motel later in the evening to see her uncle and she discovered his body. She knew that he had more counterfeit twenties with him and she realized that if the police found them they might piece together his activities and all would be revealed. It would bring disgrace and ruination to her beloved aunt who lives in a small town and wishes to remain there. Or was this niece actually her uncle's accomplice?"

"More like a beneficiary, I would guess. Until she could earn her own living."

I nodded. "So she took the phony twenties he still had—they were probably somewhere in the car—and biked away. Suppose I were to get a warrant to search her apartment?"

"You'd go through all that trouble and time just to find what will probably be an empty briefcase?"

I winced. But of course. A *briefcase*. "This uncle probably didn't bring his entire cache of counterfeit twenties down here with him. Would this niece know where the rest of them are?"

"Perhaps."

"And is this niece ready to cooperate fully with the police and tell all she knows?"

"No. That would be defeating her purpose, wouldn't it?"

"Very well," I said stiffly. "Since I have no concrete evidence of any kind I am forced to leave the matter as it is." I wagged a finger. "However, I must warn this niece that I shall keep a vigilant eye on the funny-money market. If a supply of counterfeit twenties continues to appear, I will pursue the matter relentlessly."

"Yes, sir," she said.

When I got into our car, Ralph said, "What took you so long?"

"We got to talking."

He pulled the car away from the curb. "Well, Henry, there is no syndicate and Flanagan had nothing to do with passing phony twenties. But I still can't figure why he had those twenty-three paper bags of soap in the back of his car."

I chuckled. "Ralph, as usual, you miss the obvious. The soap wasn't the significant factor at all. It was the sales slips."

"Sales slips?"

"You completely forgot that Flanagan was a Scoutmaster who would do what he could for his charges. I learned from Mrs.

Flanagan that one of them, Baldwin Brettschneider, a stalwart lad, collects sales slips just as other people collect stamps, coins, or book matches. Flanagan promised him that he would pick up as many sales slips as he could while he was down here. Baldwin has quite an extensive collection and he's planning to exhibit it in the hobby division of the next county fair."

Ralph drove for a while. "Henry, I was with you up to 'a stalwart lad,' but then you began to lose me. What are you trying to cover up?"

"I'll tell you about it sometime, Ralph. But not this year."

At the end of our shift Ralph dropped me off at my apartment. I was making a midnight sandwich in my kitchenette when the phone rang.

"Turnbuckle?" Deidre asked. "Sergeant Henry Turnbuckle?"

"The only one in the telephone book," I said proudly.

There was a momentary silence. "All right, Henry, just what the hell *is* a five-letter word for the shinbone of a New Guinea aborigine?"

"I forget at the moment. But I could look it up. Do you have any reference books in your apartment?"

"Lots."

"Good. I'll be over in half an hour."

I put on my orange jacket and hood. Downstairs I checked my reflectors and my light. Then I unlocked my bike and pedaled over to Deidre's place.

"Q"

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